



AETC Bases News Clips

Sheppard AFB, TX



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Officials: Newspaper report may be exaggerated, support SAFB response

By Lee B. Weaver
Times Record News
February 12, 2004

A Denver Post story about widespread sexual assaults involving Sheppard Air Force Base personnel may be overblown, said sources cited in the article.

But even one sexual assault, regardless of where it occurs, is one too many victim advocates said.

The story in Wednesday's Post told of "a wave of sexual assaults" at Sheppard that has gone "largely unnoticed." But the incidence of sexual assaults on base is not out of proportion with statistics for the city as a whole, according to base officials.

Likewise, police sources and victims advocates agree that Sheppard officials do an adequate job of investigating sexual assault charges. Their remarks were in contrast to the Post article, which quoted former Wichita Falls crisis counselor Laura Grimsinger as saying that Sheppard "wants to minimize sexual assault and not address it. They turn their backs on them (victims), and it's devastating."

In the article, Grimsinger - the executive director at First Step Women's Shelter & Sexual Assault Counseling until two years ago - drew comparisons between the 2003 Air Force Academy sexual assault scandal and the environment at Sheppard.

"It's a very closed society out here, too," she said in the story.

Grimsinger, now a counselor in the Electra school system, was in Austin on business Wednesday and could not be reached for comment.

Citing statistics provided by First Step, the Post article reported that "more than two dozen women" stationed at Sheppard have sought help for sexual assaults from First Step in the past year. More than 40 "fellow soldiers" took part in the alleged attacks - five of which involved gang rapes - the story said.

What's more, assaults linked to Sheppard represented 30 percent of all victims seeking help from the First Step from June 2002 to June 2003, the article said.

First Step program director Xochitl Pruitt, who was cited in the article, confirmed that the agency had counseled "20 to 25" victims from Sheppard during that time, but did not know where the 30 percent figure came from.

"We saw 542 (sexual assault victims) from Sept. 1, 2002, through Aug. 31, 2003," Pruitt said. "I think the (Post) story was kind of overblown. Still, it's alarming that any women are being sexually assaulted in 2004. One assault is too many."

Reached by phone Wednesday, the Post reporters who wrote the story said the 30 percent figure came from data in a survey filled out by First Step and returned to the Denver newspaper.

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Still, the story of sexual assault cannot be fairly told with numbers, Pruitt said.

"Every one of those 25 victims has a face," she said. "To say they represent a small percentage of assaults is a slap in that face."

Very few of the 25 assaults resulted in charges being filed and even fewer led to prosecutions, Pruitt said.

It's a typical reaction to the sexual assault, she said.

"They don't want to be shamed, blamed and re-victimized," Pruitt said. "They just want it to go away."

Victims also worry that their conduct at the time of the attack, such as underage drinking, club-going and improper fraternizing, might draw punishment from base superiors, she said.

But again, their reaction is typical of the crime.

"Whether you're a student at MSU or an airman at Sheppard or an employee at a company, you don't want to get in trouble," she said. "You don't want any more attention drawn to yourself."

Sheppard investigators often take the lead in cases involving base personnel, courthouse officials said. But both Pruitt and police officials agree that sexual assaults - and crime in general - receive fair and full attention.

"They've been doing a very good job of investigating. The challenge is when physical evidence is lacking and it becomes he said/she said," Pruitt said. "And the real disconnect comes when the victim won't report and the base never finds out about it. It's just a dead end."

Assistant District Attorney Maureen O'Brien said that she'd only seen two sexual assault prosecutions by base officials since she joined District Attorney's office in 1994.

Police department spokeswoman Cindy Walker said Sheppard officials are notified of all incidents involving victims or suspects from the base.

"I know of no issues or problems with Sheppard properly investigating sexual assaults or any other crimes involving base personnel," Walker said.

Sheppard officials, in a statement provided to the Post, said that 42 individuals had been punished for sexual assaults between 1993 and 2003.

"When compared to the large number of students trained at Sheppard during those 11 years - tens of thousands - this figure represents a very small occurrence rate," the statement said.

According to FBI crime statistics, 31 rapes were reported in Wichita Falls in 2002. Twenty-one were reported in 2001.

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Hutchison 'deeply concerned,' says incidents are 'unacceptable'

By Andre Coe
Times Record News
February 12, 2004

Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison is calling for the Department of Defense to conduct a full investigation into allegations of widespread sexual assaults at Sheppard Air Force Base. The allegations surfaced Wednesday in an article in the Denver Post.

The Post quotes victim advocates as claiming "a wave of sexual assaults has gone largely unnoticed" and that "Sheppard Air Force Base women are too scared to go public."

The article reports female victims have been discouraged from reporting crimes and have been "buzzing" the phones at First Step Inc., a victims' advocate organization. The article also reported five cases of gang rape were reported to First Step.

Sen. Hutchison, R-Texas, sent a letter to Secretary of the Air Force James G. Roche Wednesday requesting the Department of Defense Inspector General "conduct a full and detailed investigation ... with emphasis on how commanders concluded each of these cases to the satisfaction of both the Air Force and the alleged victims."

Hutchison wrote, "I am deeply concerned about recent reports that U.S. servicewomen have been raped and sexually assaulted while assigned to Sheppard Air Force Base."

She said the "number of incidents and the duration over which they occurred are unacceptable" and the situation at Sheppard could rival the sex scandal at the Air Force Academy in Colorado.

Major Manning C. Brown, director of public communication for Sheppard Air Force Base, confirmed that between 1993 and 2003, 45 Sheppard personnel went before court-martial or Article 15 proceedings for sexual assault allegations; 42 punishments were handed down.

Article 15 allows commanders to mete out punishment short of court-martial, such as reduction in rank, forfeiture of pay or confinement to base.

Brown told the Times Record News he could not release names or any information about the victims involved in the cases.

"Sheppard is proud of the safe environment it provides its personnel," Brown said. "Allegations are investigated and dealt with swiftly."

He said the well-being of assault victims is top priority at Sheppard, followed by ensuring that justice is served.

An official statement from Sheppard said, "We are focused on the issues represented by this (Post) article ... We are concerned that the information contained in the article be absolutely accurate and we are now

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gathering data on the number of incidents of sexual assaults at Sheppard for the past several years to make sure we have an accurate picture."

Brown said regular surveys and assessments conducted on base show that victims of assaults feel comfortable in coming forward.

Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, 13th District, said he will closely follow the investigation hearings ordered by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and work closely with the Armed Services Committee.

On Feb. 5 - prior to the Denver Post article - Rumsfeld ordered an internal review of military procedures in response to the more than 80 allegations made by American military personnel who were serving in Iraq and Kuwait.

"The report about assaults at Sheppard and elsewhere in the military is very disturbing," said Jack Klaus, a spokesperson for Thornberry. "It is important to discover what the facts are and determine if crimes were committed so that those responsible can be held accountable for their actions."

Rumsfeld issued a memorandum saying, "Sexual assault will not be tolerated in the Department of Defense. Commanders at every level have a duty to take appropriate steps to prevent sexual assaults, protect victims and hold those who commit offenses accountable."

According to Reuters, the Department of Defense has received 88 cases of sexual misconduct in the past year from soldiers serving in the Iraqi theater; 80 cases were reported by the Army, seven by the Air Force, and one by the Marines, Reuters reported.

The incidents have been mostly American military attacking each other and mostly women being attacked by men, the wire service reported.

The letter from Hutchison is one of many sent from U.S. senators' and U.S. representatives' offices in the past few weeks.

Senate Armed Forces Committee hearings will begin in two weeks.

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